


Day 5

Roles and Next Steps

Now that you have some tools to take a closer look at how to build connectedness in your schools, we'll spend part of today outlining the roles of all the key people in building connectedness. We also suggest some helpful resources and look at some first steps you can take.




Key Roles in Creating Connectedness

 *Prevention coordinators.* As coordinators, your role is to find ways to support members of the school community and bring people together in an effort to promote a strong sense of connectedness. Michael Kerosky, the Safe and Drug-Free Schools Coordinator in Anchorage, Alaska, suggests that coordinators need to find schools that have the support to build connectedness and facilitate that success.



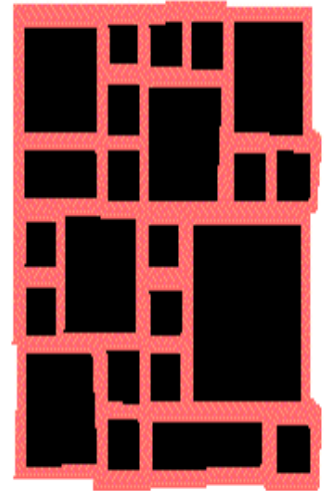
"It's better to spend a lot of time on a small group and have it succeed than spread it around and have no success," he says. "We picked six schools, and we are spending a lot of time on those schools. We picked schools where principals were committed to this. We're going to put as much time and energy as we have to get those six schools successful. Nothing is going to convince the other schools faster than their peers. The coordinator's role is to find places to pilot these initiatives."

Coordinators can also marshal the evidence of the need for connectedness, which we discussed in Day 1 and Day 2, and provide resources, which we will take a closer look at a little later.


 *Principals.* The principals must be behind any work to increase connectedness in their schools. They are the cheerleaders and the orchestrators. They also need to

model the connectedness with the teachers, staff, and students that they want to see in their school, for example:

- Greeting every student each morning
- Holding collaborative meetings with teachers and soliciting their input
- Promoting cooperative learning and meaningful participation with students
- Giving meaningful roles to other school staff to promote connectedness
- Providing professional development to teachers so that they can learn about ways to build more connectedness into their classrooms and their interactions with students



“You have to go school by school,” Kerosky says. “It can't be legislated from above. Get a principal who is sold on it, believes in it and pilot it in those schools. Help those principals be successful, and other schools will see it and want to imitate it. You can't say, ‘All you principals - we are going to do connectedness.’ Anything top down, people will go through the motions. You have to be sincere. At the same time, the principal has to do the same thing with the faculty. Feed your staff so you don't eat the students. Treat them well, compliment them, acknowledge them, and celebrate them. All of the things you want them to do with students. Develop a relationship that is a working relationship. Even if the teachers are not performing, you have a way to have them perform better, rather than come down on them and be mean to them and be a bully. That will trickle down to the students. The best program in the world won't work if the faculty are mean. If the teachers are not practicing the principles of connectedness, the program content will not be effective. The students pay attention more to the teacher's behavior than what he or she is saying. The principal has to remind the faculty that it's a goal and set a tone that shows in his or her behavior.”

 **Teachers.** Teachers have one of the most important roles in building connectedness. Studies have consistently shown that teachers are among the most important adults in building school connectedness. Surveys of students also reveal that they want closer relationships with their teachers.

“A good test for high school teachers is, do you know your students' names?” Kerosky says. “How many high school students go through a year and the teachers don't know their names? The benchmark we use is, will someone miss you if you are absent for a day? Teachers can stand in the hall and greet students instead of rustling through papers while kids enter the class - be at the door and greet them. Look them in the eye. How was the game last night? Steps like these and others like it go a long way in letting students know they are being acknowledged and included. Often at schools, teachers are notorious for saying, The parents are a mess, there's nothing I can do. That's what the whole resiliency framework says is not true. Students may lack parental support, but other adult relationships can easily compensate. Often, teachers are the most significant people in their lives, especially if they have tough relationships with their parents.”



Other school staff. School staff, such as secretaries, nurses, cafeteria workers, custodians, and paraprofessionals, are often overlooked as key adults who can build connectedness. These staff often have a lot of contact with students and may also feel disconnected themselves. Providing them with roles to build students' connectedness can in turn build their own allegiance to their school.



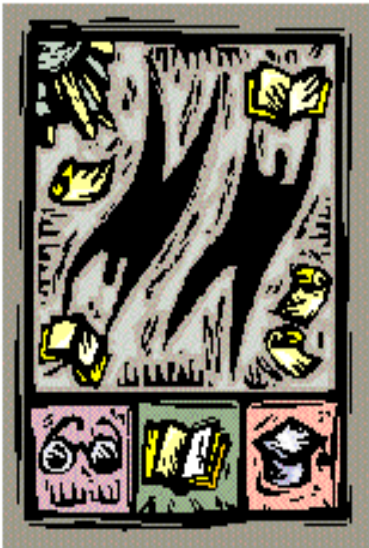
School Staff Build Rapport with Music, Specialty Classes

“Staff members both in and outside the classroom can contribute greatly toward building school climate. Building Plant Operator Ivan Doucet, known by Ursa Major Elementary students to be firm yet fun, plays music during lunch on Fridays to reward students for great behavior and holds mini-dances after students finish eating. Cafeteria Manager Laura Homan likes to keep things lively as well. She invented 'Mix It Up Day,' during which students must eat with peers they don't know. It can be a little awkward at first, but the kids end up relaxing and having fun getting acquainted. Ms. Homan has observed students with shy tendencies becoming a little less so as a result of this exercise. Ms. Homan knows Ursa Major's students, and her awareness of them has made a difference in their lives. She once noticed a group of fifth grade girls developing unhealthy eating habits. Ms. Homan alerted staff and collaborated with the school psychologist, counselor, teachers, and the family school services coordinator to create a Body Image

class. Lessons focused on nutrition, exercise, eating and dieting, steroids, and body image. This joint effort to address student health issues is one example of the atmosphere of teamwork and support that Ursa Major is creating."

Source: Safe and Drug-Free Schools, Anchorage School District. (in press). *Helping Kids Succeed-Anchorage School District Style*. Anchorage, AK: Author.

◆ **Students.** Students are another group that can get slighted in the quest to build connectedness. While there may be sincere efforts to implement strategies to help students feel connected, if they are not consulted about what would work for them, these efforts are not going to be as effective as they might be. Students, like all of us, want to have meaningful roles in their own lives.



Among the ways that students can be active participants in building connectedness is by conducting surveys of the school's climate and following up those results with action plans. Students can also serve on school and city committees where they have real decision-making power. They can take part in service-learning projects that they design, and work on community problems. Many schools are using the framework of developmental assets, which was created by the Search Institute. Schools educate students on the assets, and then students look at the assets they have now and how they can increase their assets and the assets of their peers.

◆ **Parents.** The parents of students play one of the most important roles in connectedness. Their attitude toward school will affect their children's attitudes. Their involvement in school can help their children feel more connected to all parts of their lives, and help school staff find ways to better connect with students. Parents, however, tend to become less involved in school as their children get older. They may be more willing to get involved when the school reaches out to address their needs, such as offering parenting and ESL classes or other

information that is seemingly unrelated to education and child rearing but is equally important, such as getting out of debt. Schools may also have to come to the parents, such as visiting neighborhoods where they live and walking home with kids who are in trouble. Getting parents involved early on in any new initiatives can be a way to increase their connectedness to schools.



Community members and organizations. Schools and parents cannot be the only ones that are trying to build connectedness among youth. As one coordinator pointed out, schools only have students for about six hours a day. Parents may see their children for even less time. A good bit of students' free time, especially as they get older, is spent out in the community. If they do not feel welcomed in the community, it will probably be harder for them to feel connected to that community, of which school is a part.



When Janis Whitlock did her doctoral dissertation on school and community connectedness, she was surprised to see how much students were affected by people in the community that they did not even know. Students talked about the frustration they felt when they walked into stores and clerks followed them around or looked at them suspiciously as if they were about to steal the merchandise. They spoke about how alienating it felt when they walked around town or looked for public places to gather and were then made to feel unwelcome or unwanted. Underneath the anger was a feeling of hurt at being rejected, Whitlock says. Students also said that they wanted places to hang out and feel accepted. Only 40 percent of the students surveyed said that they felt like they were well-regarded in their community and felt positive about their community. Just one in five participants felt like they had meaningful roles in their community.

In a report on her findings, Whitlock quotes an adult who says, "When you talk about governments in terms of what they do for young people, you always end up having a conversation about what I call a `caretaker mentality.' The adults will tell you - this is what we do for kids - we offer them recreation programs, we offer them all these activities, we offer them these opportunities. But never do they ask the kids, and then they can't understand why kids won't go . . . I think if government wants to create a different view of what they can do for kids - start talking about decision making, taking about activities that may not be recreational but may be service-orientated. Create an expectation of some kind of meaningful activity that someone can point to and say, `Hey man, you did a good job, you know, that was a wonderful activity,

and you helped someone.”

Next Steps

“The first thing coordinators need to do is get a vision for what they want. Without a vision, you have nowhere to go.”

- Kristen Pelster, assistant principal at Ridgewood Middle School in Arnold, Missouri

When Pelster and her colleagues were faced with the task of turning around a low-performing, disconnected school, they first sat down with key people, including teachers, parents, and community members. Pelster and her staff asked them for their vision of the school. What would an exemplary school look like? Based on that feedback, the group wrote a vision for the school. She and others say that it is also critical to realize that changing a school's climate and connectedness can take years. That is one reason why it is crucial to set small, achievable goals, such as improving the physical look of the school.

*“You have to feel like you are having constant successes,” Pelster says.
“If you don't, you will throw in the towel.”*

As a coordinator, another step is to look at the programs and resources your schools are already providing through the lens of building connectedness. What do you have in place? What could enhance connectedness?

A third step is to take a climate survey of students, faculty, and staff. Such a survey can give you important information about the needs that still exist for connectedness in your schools. Try to involve students in the survey, including developing the questions, administering it, tabulating the results, and making an action plan. That involvement will help them feel connected as you work to increase connectedness throughout the school.

Click [here](#) for sample tools to assess the climate in your school

Resources for Help

There are numerous organizations and materials that can help you and your school dig deeper into the important topic of school connectedness. On this final day of the event, please complete the following steps:

1

Review the list of [additional resources](#) located in the Resources & Links section. You will find links to several on-line publications and organizations with information about the meaning of and methods for promoting school connectedness.

2

Identify one resource that you find interesting, follow the link, and spend some time reviewing the publication or learning about the organization.

3

Visit the Discussion Area to share with your fellow participants and the event facilitator the link you followed and any interesting tips you learned.



Please also take some time today to share any additional thoughts - either about the topic of school connectedness or about this on-line event - in the [Discussion Area](#) .



Click [here](#) to print a PDF
of today's materials.



***When you are done, please click [here](#) to complete a
feedback form so that we
can improve future on-line events!***



Thank you for participating in
***School Connectedness and Meaningful
Student Participation***

We hope that you enjoyed the event!

References for Day 5 materials:

Kerosky, M. (February, 2005). Personal communication.

Pelster, K. (February, 2005). Personal communication.

Safe and Drug-Free Schools, Anchorage School District. (in press). *Helping Kids Succeed-Anchorage School District Style*. Anchorage, AK: Author.

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Whitlock, J. (2004). *Places to Be and Places to Belong: Youth Connectedness in School and Community*. Ithaca, NY: Family Life Development Center, Cornell University.

